DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 035 655 TE 001 712

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TITLE	Fourth Graders Do Write About Their Problems.
INSTITUTION	National Council of Teachers of English, Champaign, Ill.
PUB DATE	Oct 68
NOTE	5p.
JOURNAL CIT	Elementary English; v45 n6 p731-35 Oct 1968
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.35
DESCRIPTORS	*Composition (Literary), Elementary School Students, *English Instruction, *Grade 4, Student Attitudes, *Student Characteristics, Student Opinion, *Student Problems, Student School Relationship, World Problems

ABSTRACT

The question of whether or not intermediate grade children write about their problems was the focus of an investigation conducted among 363 fourth grade students. Children were requested to respond to a paragraph concerning change in the world by writing a compostion answering how and what they would change if they had the power. Findings showed that children ranked school problems highest, with world and national problems rating second place, personal problems third place, and home problems fourth place. Conclusions drawn were that fourth graders do write about their problems, concentrating most on those associated with school (especially their inadequate classroom performance) and, to a lesser extent, on problems acquired through secondary sources. (See ED 030 648 for the author's doctoral dissertation upon which this article is based.) (JM)

Elementary English; Vol. 45, No. 6, October 1968

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Fourth Graders Do Write About Their Problems

"Does the written composition of fourth graders give any indication of, or insights into, the child's problems?" "Do intermediate pupils write about their problems?" These, and similar questions, are not unlike those found in the literature relating to written composition in the elementary school.

The Problem

The purpose of this investigation was to analyze the compositions of a large number of fourth graders to determine if fourth graders write about their problems.

Background of the Problem

The content of children's personal compositions has been discussed by various writers. What children write, and why, seems at least equally important as the "how." It is obvious that some of the content of their compositions is but a retelling of some story received from such sources as television, movies, and comic books. It is also apparent that some of the writings that proceed from the child are things that are very real in his own existence. Burrows, *et al.* (1965) deal with this question as follows:

> What do children write about when they write just for fun? Why about themselves, of course. To be sure, they are not aware that this is what they are doing. They think they are making up adventures of an imaginary hero or a mischievous bear. But in reality, when they become absorbed in telling about Uncle Rufftuff or the Bossy King, it is their own experiences—their own thinking and feeling—that they unconsciously reveal. (Burrows, *et al.*, p. 84)

In another place these same authors state, "Personal writing serves the need for the release of tensions and for the draining of aggressions, fears, and destructive emotions." (p. 222)

Richard Corbin (1966) writes in the following manner about the candor with which the beginning writer exposes his world:

> As a beginning writer, the child is likely to be a realist, reflecting his micro cosmic world with sometimes painful clarity, examining it with simple logic. He likes to talk about his adventures—. . . . He talks about family secrets in a candid way that would cause his parents extreme anguish if they knew. . . . He reports on his playmates, his home, his neighborhood. And, of course there are always the pets. He writes lucidly and directly about these things, presenting his world as he sees it with little or no attempt to ornament or change it. (Corbin, p. 46)

One might assume, justifiably, that as the child examines and presents his world as he sees it, he would also present the problems that become a part of his world.

As justifiable as this assumption may seem, there have been some findings to the contrary. Neal R. Edmund (1960) had

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64 intermediate grade pupils list their "personal problems—things they worried about and feared." One week later these pupils were assigned to write a composition on a topic of their own choosing. He reports his findings in the following manner:

> 1. Five of the 64 pupils wrote about topics involving their problems, 59 did not.
> 2. Five wrote about situations reflecting their worries, 59 did not.
> 3. Three wrote about some aspects of their fears, 61 did not. (Edmund, p. 243)
>
> Edmund concluded by stating:
>
> If these findings are indicative of general intermediate grade practice, it appears unmistakable that children do not vent their emotions through writing compositions in school. (Edmund, p. 242)

It would appear from these samples of the literature that some differences of opinion do exist.

Procedure

The papers analyzed in this study were one of five sets collected during the author's research for his dissertation. Each pupil in the original study wrote compositions under timed circumstances (as prescribed for the STEP Essay Tests) on five topics:

Topic 1 STEP Essay 4B.
Topic 2 Any Topic of the Writer's choosing.
Topic 3 STEP Essay 4D.
Topic 4 A special paragraph written by the writer.
Topic 5 STEP Essay 4A.

The paragraph used for this study was Topic 4, which was written by the author for this purpose. The paragraph to which the children were responding was as follows:

> The world in which we are living is changing very fast. Many of the things that we use every day were not even thought possible twenty-five years ago. Many things that we use today will be old fashioned twenty-five years from now. Imagine that you have a special magic power. This power makes you able to change anything you want to change in our world and the things that affect our lives. Write a story about the kind of a world that you would make. How would you change your life to make it different from the way it is now? Remember, you have the power to change anything about your life and the world in which you live.

The pupils' compositions were analyzed, using the definition of a "problem" as reported in the Edmund study:

> Problems were defined as situations pupils wanted to change or deficiencies they wanted to overcome. . . . (Edmund, p. 242)

Findings

Out of 363 papers, 9 students did not follow instructions. These papers were omitted from the analysis leaving 352. Out of this number, 66 or 18.7 per cent of the pupils did not express any problems that would fit the definition accepted for this analysis. These papers were largely stories about the world which incorporated either a creative fabrication of the pupil or some interweaving of some plot from television, movies, or comic books. Batman appeared in these "world changes" on a number of papers.

The remaining 288 papers (81.3%) mentioned a total of 498 problems for an average of 1.73 per paper. These problems were divided into five general areas:

Problem Area	Number of Problems	Percent of Total Problems Expressed
1. School Problems	222	43.34
2. World Problems	183	35.76
3. Personal Problems	60	11.72
4. Home Problems	34	6.64
5. Miscellaneous	13	2.54
	498	

School Problems

Problems related to the child's school experiences topped the list of things that the children wanted to "change or deficiencies they wanted to overcome." Eighty

nine pupils would get rid of schools entirely if they had the special magic power granted in this writing situation. Some of the ways that the pupils expressed this desire follow:

> "I would change the school into an ant hill and the teachers into ants and then step on them." (Karen)
>
> "I would change the school into a museaum (museum) so we wouldn't have a school to go to." (Pam)
>
> "If I could live in another world, I would like to live in a world without school—like Australia." (David)
>
> "If I where (were) magic I would turn all the schools to cheese. Then all the mice would eat it. Then there would be no schools." (Jon)
>
> "I would have a world where I wouldn't have to step a foot in a dumb old school." (Bill)

These are but a few of the ways that the fourth graders expressed themselves. Others wanted to change the school into a lake for swimming, a rotten tomato, dirt, paper and then burn it, or a junkyard, while others just wanted to burn or blow it up. One girl expressed her views in poetry as follows:

> "The world would be so beautiful
> And not a school in sight
> And in Veat Naum (Vietnam)
> No Solders (soldiers) would have to fight."
> (Bonnie)

The school seems to be a source of frustration to many children. This is especially true of children of lesser ability. Many of the pupils whose papers indicated school problems also indicated deficiencies in spelling and other skills associated with written composition. Four examples of these deficiencies can be seen in the following:

Jane writes:

> If I had the power I would change myself into a perfect stundt (student) and I always got stragt (straight) A. In arithmetic when the teacher would call on me I would say all the anwser (answers) right. Then when she called on another persen (person) and got it worng (wrong) she would call on me and I would say it right. Everytime she called on me I never get the anwser (answer) worng (wrong). There's another persen (person) in my roon (room) that is a stragt (straight) A stundt (student) but not as good as I am.

Richard wrote about his school problems as follows:

> I wish I cod (could) get rid of Miss Jones (his teacher) and all of all the mean techers (teachers) and all people how (who) make it hard for me. If I cod (could) get rid of all math, English, spelling, heath (health), sience (science), reading and school.

Douglas stated his wishes in the following manner:

> I would like to make it so we would have jim (gym) every period ecsept (except) recess and still learn what we need to know.

Roger wrote:

> If I was (were) magic I would change all techers (teachers) in to (into) pigs. Then I would bun (burn) down the skcools (schools) and then Id (I'd) change the techers (teachers) back into monsters.

On the basis of inspection without any statistical treatment, it appeared that the school received the most critical comments from pupils that were frustrated by the tasks attempted in the classroom.

Non-School Problems (Remaining four areas)

The children's papers analyzed in this study showed that children write about world or national problems. They are concerned with the existing war in Vietnam and even more concerned about war in general. Eighty children would use their "magic powers" to stop wars, destroy weapons, and make nations get along with each other. Out of this total of 80 students, 18 made specific reference to the war in Vietnam.

These fourth grade pupils were very much aware of, and concerned with, some of the other great problems such as starvation, poverty, sickness, death, and the existence of crime. These world and national problems ranked second only to the problems associated with the school. The world and national problems were mentioned in the following frequencies:

1. Stop wars in general and destroy weapons. 62
2. Stop war in Vietnam. 18
3. Problems related to starvation, poverty, sickness, and death. 65
4. Problem of crime in the United States. 18
5. Changing people in some way to make them nice, to like one another, and so everybody would be free. 20

There is little doubt that some of these problems are acquired or derived from various sources. This study seems to indicate that fourth-graders are hearing the discussions of their parents, seeing things on television, or reading news that causes them to desire certain changes in our world.

The children's compositions included some desired changes that seemed to indicate personal problems. Some would use their "magic power" to do such things as change their appearance, make it so people would like them, or other problems which could be considered as a personal problem or desire. This included:

1. Expressed a desire to get rid of the opposite sex (either entirely or some specified person). 19
2. Expressed the desire to have their personal appearance changed in some manner. 13
3. Expressed a desire to actually commit some act of violence. 11
4. Expressed some personal fear or anxiety. 10
5. Expressed the desire to have situations changed in such a way to make their peers like them better. 7

Another area that was changed by the "powers" granted to these fourth graders was in relationships with their family and peers. In this analysis, this area seemed lower than was expected. This fact could indicate, that while in school, children are preoccupied with problems pertaining to the school. It might suggest that children of this age have learned not to express home problems in their writing at school. It could indicate that the sample was made up of children from homes where few problems existed. Whatever the reasons, the 34 desired changes expressed were distributed as follows:

1. Expressed the desire to change their parents or home in some way that would indicate a deep dissatisfaction. 13
2. Expression of sibling animosity. 12
3. Expression of the desire to get rid of some member of their family or some peer. 9

One boy wanted to "throw his sister in a goodwill bag." Another wanted to "change it so my mother would not have to work and then she would not yell at me so much." One boy wanted to use his power to "change his parents so they would be nice."

The children wrote about other situations that they wanted to change which were classified as miscellaneous. This category included thirteen problems which seem to be of lesser importance such as getting rid of dognappers, taxes, L.B.J., and other "problems" that seem to be accepted from external sources.

Limitations of this Analysis.

1. The papers analyzed in this study are the by-product of another research project and were analyzed using Edmund's definition of a problem only after it was observed that these papers seem to conflict with his findings. As such, this analysis did not follow the generally accepted preplanning stages of statistical research.

2. The stimulus paragraph was not

planned specifically for this analysis; thus it might be leading the children to write about desired changes more than would normally be the case. To label all of these desired changes as "problems" in accordance with Edmund's definition would be unacceptable. Therefore a judgmental decision had to be made as to which desired changes constituted a problem and which did not.

These two limitations should be considered in the use of the findings.

Conclusions.

1. Fourth grade pupils do write about their problems when given an opportunity to do so.
2. Fourth grade pupils write about problems in many areas but in this analysis the largest group was problems associated with the school.
3. It seemed as a result of this analysis that the most intense reaction to school, school practices, and teachers, were expressed by pupils who were unable to fulfill the expectations of the classroom situation.
4. Fourth grade pupils are concerned about problems that they hear about from secondary sources such as those mentioned as world and national problems.

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